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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001205

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SUBJECT: TFH01: ELECTIONS AND THE PROSPECT FOR DISRUPTION

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1202

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: Continued opposition to elections by supporters of President Zelaya coupled with technical weaknesses in the electoral authorities' reporting system keep open the possibility that the November 29 elections could be disrupted in a few of Honduras' 18 departments, though a nationwide failure appears unlikely. The ability and will of the anti-coup resistance movement to carry out acts of violence to prevent elections has been inflated by both extremes in the political crisis. Even if the resistance does not carry out an extensive, coordinated campaign to halt the election process, popular concern over the potential for violence could reduce voter participation. However, a variety of sources suggest most Hondurans are eager to vote, and even many who oppose the June 28 coup d'etat and the de facto regime are in favor of elections taking place. Disruptions are likely to hurt the Liberal Party most. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The anti-coup resistance movement maintains that elections held before the reinstatement of President Zelaya are not valid and are encouraging their supporters to abstain from voting on November 29. Accurate information on the number of people who oppose elections or on the ability of the resistance to carry out acts of violence to prevent elections from taking place has been difficult to obtain; there are no reliable domestic opinion polls, and both the resistance leaders and the extreme supporters of the de facto regime have sought to amplify the potential for violence to suit their own purposes. For the resistance, a widespread public fear of violence could reduce voter participation, even if the resistance lacks the ability to carry out their threats. The extreme hard line supporters of the de facto regime use the threats of the resistance to justify suppression of dissent and aggressive police tactics against the largely-peaceful opposition.

13. (C) Emboffs met with Guadalupe Lopez and Pablo Bahr of the Honduran Municipal Association's (AMHON) transition program on November 13 to discuss the status of elections in the countryside from the municipal perspective. AMHON's transition program, which is funded in part by USAID, works with 288 municipalities of all sizes across Honduras. Lopez said that only a handful of mayors and other municipal authorities had expressed intent to disrupt the election process on November 29, though a very few had threatened to destroy the balloting materials when they arrived or block

public access to the polling places on election day. (Note: the TSE has been unable to provide an official list of candidates who have renounced their candidacies, but estimates the total at "10 to-30," mostly from municipal races. End note.) According to Lopez and Bahr, most who expressed opposition to the coup had said they would still participate, or at most would sit out. The areas with the highest degree of municipal-level opposition to the elections were in the rural western departments of Lempira and Santa Barbara, as well as President Zelaya's home department of Olancho, in the east. Lopez noted there were other isolated towns where the authorities were strongly pro-resistance, such as Sabana Grande, south of Tegucigalpa in Francisco Morazan department. Lopez also said that in some of the few cases where municipal candidates have renounced their candidacy in protest, they had done so after realizing they were unlikely to win election. He said municipal leaders who oppose the elections are almost exclusively Liberal Party members. However, Lopez noted that potential voters who have expressed second thoughts about voting because they fear violence have been from all areas, not just those with a strong resistance presence. AMHON's own admittedly unscientific estimate is that approximately 10 percent of urban voters oppose elections.

14. (C) Another element that may contribute to disruption of elections is the technical ability of elections authorities. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) has been unable to secure enough elections custodians to carry out its original plan for managing polling sites and reporting results, citing a budget shortfall of USD 600,000 as a result of international donor suspensions. The TSE has not hired the

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planned 4,500 custodians to be present at each voting center. They have scaled back to under 1,000 custodians and monitors, who will cover the centers in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula and a sampling of rural voting centers nationwide. (Note: Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula constitute 24 percent of the national total. End note.) In total, the TSE hopes the system will place custodians and monitors in contact with up to 73 percent of all polling centers in the country. This technical weakness could make transmission of preliminary results less reliable, because the reporting responsibility will fall on the less-trained, partisan poll workers with only limited training and oversight by the impartial district custodians. In locations where municipal authorities oppose elections, the absence of TSE custodians could make it easier for the resistance to prevent reporting the preliminary results. Where preliminary results are not available, a quick count by a scaled-back domestic monitor system and the hand count of the paper ballots, a process that takes days to certify, will become the only source for results. In a test run of the quick count reporting system on November 15, the TSE received one response out of the 25 total expected from (resistance hotspot) Copan Department. Historically, perception of fraud and manipulation has centered on the slower counts. Without same-night results, conspiracy theories will likely proliferate, and the final result will be seen as subject to tampering and less credible.

15. (SBU) One strongly positive development favoring the success of elections was the November 14 decision of the left-wing Democratic Unification (UD) Party to participate in elections. UD presidential candidate Cesar Ham has been an outspoken supporter of Zelaya's proposed constituent assembly and opponent to the coup. But UD contacts informed Embassy officers that in the November 14 party meeting, the vote was 85 percent in favor of participating. They added that their own polling showed that among supporters of anti-coup independent president candidate Carlos H. Reyes, who withdrew his candidacy in protest over the failure to restore the democratic and constitutional order before elections, 70 percent favored elections taking place as scheduled. Participation by UD candidates may provide an outlet for the more moderate opponents of the coup to voice their opposition

through the ballot box (details reported reftel).

¶16. (C) While the string of minor bombing incidents around Tegucigalpa (and to a lesser degree other parts of Honduras) illustrates there is a radical element willing to use violence to create fear and disrupt elections, the Embassy has found no evidence to suggest the violent fringe of the resistance is capable of a widespread, coordinated attack on election day. Police contacts have informed Embassy officers that they have discovered small caches of weapons and disrupted a handful of cells who have admitted plans to knock out infrastructure such as cell phone towers and bridges. But security authorities have downplayed the ability of the resistance to carry out their worst threats. Nonetheless, the de facto regime has used the threat of violence to justify a campaign of forced disarmament by the police in advance of elections. On November 21, the regime published an official decree that revoked all permits to carry handguns, and police announced they were carrying out a nationwide campaign to confiscate all handguns from private citizens. (Note: details will be reported septel. End note.) Given the resource limitations of the armed forces and police, polling centers will remain relatively soft targets on election day.

¶17. (C) Comment: While there will almost certainly be some incidents of disruptions and technical failures on election day, all signs point to strong public support for successful elections, even among opponents to the coup. Areas where the threat of boycott and violence appear greatest are rural departments that do not represent the bulk of potential votes, but traditionally favor the Liberal Party. The Embassy will have over 25 teams in the field on election day serving as a technical reporting team, and will maintain contact with independent observers, to report on election activities. End comment.  
LLORENS